The word ‘widow’ comes from Sanskrit and means ‘empty’ (Caine, 1974). Since biblical times, accounts of the plight of the widowed have evoked powerful images of women at their most vulnerable and in greatest need. Throughout history, the widow has been a ‘cultural category, produced and shaped through popular culture, custom, and law’ (Bradbury, 2011: 390). While the ‘lusty widow trope’ was emphasised in comedies by Shakespeare’s contemporaries (Kehler, 2006: 21), other cultural representations have included ‘the Merry or inconsolable [widow]; the poor deserving widow; the black widow who had buried several husbands; the faithful widow wearing black until her own death’ (Bradbury, 2011: 390). The lens of culture is a powerful tool in explicating processes and practices of meanings in widowhood. This chapter explores cultural understandings and representations of how widowhood is experienced and is being changed by societal and cultural forces, and how it is understood and represented in research and in the wider cultural context.

Experiencing widowhood

Widowhood is both a status and a process. It is the status of an individual who has not remarried following the death of his or her spouse (Martin-Matthews & Davidson, 2005). Widowhood is also a process of transition, progressing from the illness to the death of the spouse and related events involving burial and mourning, grieving, and reconstruction of one’s social world (Martin Matthews, 1991). It is also both sex-selective and age-related. In many developed countries, half of all marriages end with the death of the husband, but only one-fifth with the death of the wife.

Widowhood has become a central concept in studies of older people, reflecting and influencing our thinking about old people in general, and old women in particular (Martin-Matthews, 1999). Over time, with increased standards of public health, hygiene and medical care, the average age at widowhood has increased steadily, so widowhood today is primarily associated with older women. But this is not universal. Most recent available data indicate that in developed countries, approximately 16 per cent of widowed women are younger than 60, compared to 34 per cent in Latin America, and 44 per cent in the countries of Africa (Alter Chen, 1995).
While the incidence (number) of widowed people in the population is increasing, its prevalence (proportion of the population) is decreasing in many parts of the world. Its duration is also decreasing (Martin-Matthews, 2011). Widowhood traditionally was a predictable, ‘expectable’ and defining characteristic of women’s old age; but is less so today (Martin Matthews, 1987, 1991; Martin-Matthews, 1999; Martin-Matthews & Davidson, 2005). Societal trends such as increased prevalence of divorce and singlehood in later life impact the prevalence of widowhood. Medical advances (such as reduction in deaths from heart attack in men) also delay the onset of widowhood. But this is not a global phenomenon. The epidemic of HIV/AIDS, for example, has reduced the average age of widowhood for both men and women in many parts of Africa (Martin-Matthews, 2011). Nevertheless, the predominant trend of a steady increase in average age at widowhood and shorter duration of widowhood have, together, profoundly ‘transformed the intimate landscape for old people’ (Allen & Walker, 2006: 160).

**Historical contexts**

‘The lives of widows any place in the world, in the past, present, or future reflect […] the interweave of societal history and personal biography. The culture and social structure of a society at any period of time influence the whole pattern of a member’s existence’ (Lopata 1996: 211). Representations of widowhood in socio-historical context are inevitably tied to the culture of the times in terms of: rituals of grief, mourning and bereavement; laws and customs that frame marital, inheritance and property rights; and the role of women and the place of patriarchy in social and cultural context. In a wonderfully insightful and thorough analysis of the records pertaining to two cohorts of women widowed in Montreal, Canada during the second half of the nineteenth century, Bradbury (2011) links the narratives of the individual itineraries of their lives with analysis of the laws and customs that framed their rights as wives and widows and the political debates that changed them. Several aspects of widowhood stand out as particularly noteworthy in historical perspective: prohibitions against remarriage, forms of naming and address and clothing proscriptions.

The prevailing discourse of early modern England encouraged widows to live as celibates and to epitomize piety (Kehler, 2006). Historically, very strict customs and rules restricted remarriage soon after widowhood, with remarriage within a year punished as adultery, representing ‘infidelity to her husband’s memory’ (Bradbury, 2011: 214). While such customs have largely disappeared, in countries such as India, prohibitions against a widowed woman remarrying persist, with severity of practices varying among castes (Reddy, 2004).

Cultural practices of the nomenclature of widowhood, as recorded in legal registers and census documents, also reflect cultural proscriptions of patriarchal societies and women’s lack of autonomy, rights to property and possessions in their own right. Canadian historical records describe women as ‘Widow Pelton’, or the French, ‘Veuve Gamelin’ (Bradbury, 2011: 391). The Scottish reference to a widow as ‘relict of the late’ (male name) was also ubiquitous. Such naming conventions have been described as ‘embodied traces of their former husbands, whose identity persisted in their names’ (Bradbury, 2011: 384).

Clothing conventions also represent culturally defined characteristics of widowhood. Prior to about the 1930s, a woman’s clothing immediately identified her status as a widow. This was especially true if she was a recent widow, but, for many, wearing her widowhood persisted throughout her lifetime. The distinctive garb was referred to as widow’s weeds, a ‘chrysalis of gloom’ (Bradbury, 2011: 205). Historians of material culture have contributed much to our understanding of the evolution of mourning fashions, functioning as ‘cultural shields’ locking ‘widows’ bodies into their husbands’ shadows for at least a year, while publicly announcing
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their mourning’ (Bradbury, 2011: 232). With the increasing secularization of society, elaborate mourning garb has largely disappeared in western societies. However, in parts of India and Africa today, widowhood is still accompanied by rituals involving dress and appearance. While these rituals have remained normative expectations of widowhood in some cultural contexts, widowhood for most of the twentieth century was a largely invisible status, without an institutionalized role, ‘only a pervasive identity [...] that enters, more or less intrusively, into the relationships of her various social roles’ (Lopata, 1996: 211)

International contexts

There is an emergent research literature on widowhood in an international context (Martin-Matthews, 2011, Martin-Matthews, Tong, Rosenthal & McDonald, 2013). These studies, typically focused on women’s experiences of widowhood (although not necessarily in later life), highlight the relationship between the characteristics of widowhood and the status of women in society. Variations from one society to another, and within societies, reflect social and cultural norms surrounding death, mourning, and remarriage.

Almost 2 decades ago, Lopata (1996: 212) described how, in North American society in particular and western societies in general,

At this time in history [...] in this society, being widowed is not as bad as it has been at other times and places. Being a widow in traditional, patriarchally encrusted India was not an enviable situation, especially with the prevailing myth that widows caused the death of their husbands.

Lopata used the past tense in referring to atrocities against widows in many patriarchal societies, but, alas, rites that depersonalize, dehumanize, and violate widows’ rights to dignity persist (Okoye, 1995). In India, the wife’s place is with her husband, both in life and in death, and with his death, her life is one of misery (Mehta, 2002; Reddy, 2004). In the name of tradition, widows are often forced to marry an in-law, to preserve family control of their late husband’s property (Chi, 2010). In India, and in some African cultures, particularly Nigeria (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2012), and in Cameroon (Chi, 2010), women are immediately suspect, even following their husband’s natural death. In some African cultures, widows ‘prove’ their innocence only by lying with the dead body prior to interment, or drinking water washed out of the husband’s corpse (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2012). Such abhorrent practices, ‘enshrined in culture and tradition’, are typically spearheaded by other women, themselves ‘potential widows’. Adekunbi (2001, as cited in Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2012) describes this as culture and society having ‘subtly warped their thinking and perception against themselves’.

With widespread transnational migration, however, national cultures of widowhood may be reflected in global diasporas. In increasingly secularized societies, mourning rituals and bereavement have become largely deinstitutionalized, especially in most individualistic western societies, with expressions of grief typically restricted or denied (Bedikian, 2008). Among more collectivist societies, however, elaborate and intense rituals endure. Especially where widowhood represents a devalued status, cultural traditions of the home country may be reflected in immigrant widows’ continuing identification with the late spouse and conducting rituals (in dress, and in grave visitations) in their honour, to provide stability during emotional upheaval (Panagiotopolous et al., 2013).

Migrants from more communal or collectivist cultures face additional challenges in negotiating their widowhood in individualistic societies that require a self-confidence and ability
to utilize resources that may not be readily available (Lopata, 1996). The experiences of older immigrant Chinese widows in Canada illustrate how cultural proscriptions that inhibit grief and advocate silent acceptance of bereavement conflict with host country norms, isolating widows emotionally as they endeavour to become more independent over time (Martin-Matthews et al., 2013).

**Complexities and intersectionalities: a focus on gender**

Widowhood is defined not only by cultural norms and values involving mourning and bereavement, but also by the way in which it intersects with age, gender, race, class and the status of women in society. While the gendered nature of widowhood is generally well researched and understood (Martin Matthews, 1991; Davidson, 2002; van den Hoonoord, 2010), it is within cultural systems of patriarchy that gender differences are most stridently, in Bradbury’s words, ‘produced and policed’. Historically, neither custom, the church, law, nor gossip placed restraints on men’s widowhood and [...] remarriages as heavily as they did on women’s’, with widows remaining ‘publicly linked to their deceased husbands in myriad ways that were not true of men’ (Bradbury, 2011: 10). In some African cultures today, widowhood practices are still reserved for women and not for men (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2012). The belief that ‘the god that owns a woman is the husband that married her’ is held with conviction (Okagbue, 1997: 89).

When understood in the context of life course and intersectionality, widowhood is shaped by, and itself shapes, social roles, relations and resources and life circumstances. Many older people experience widowhood against a backdrop of other age-related changes such as chronic illness, disability, and diminished physical and cognitive capacities (Lund, 1989, Chambers, 2005). It may coincide with retirement from the paid labour force, or the care of increasingly long-lived parents. Cultural understandings of one life transition and status such as widowhood must be contextualized by a recognition of the ‘composite nature and the timing of transitions’ and how they are enacted through socio-cultural, relational and personal processes (Grenier, 2012: 137).

**New forms and cultures of widowhood**

Throughout most of history, the social category of widow has been a product of heterosexual marriage (Bradbury, 2011), and this is reflected in all cultural representations of widowhood. However, same-sex marriage is now permitted in at least a dozen countries, and in other sub-national jurisdictions. In these jurisdictions, legal benefits commonly associated with marriage have been extended to cohabiting same-sex couples, in some for a decade or more.

Same-sex partner bereavement has long been experienced outside the conventions of traditional marriage. Such loss has not been recognized as widowhood, often with attendant legal and financial difficulties for bereaved partners (Whipple, 2006). While the understanding of widowhood following long-term same-sex unions remains limited (Bonanno, Moskowitz, Papa & Folkman, 2005; Whipple, 2006), there is literature on gay male bereavement. Same-sex partners (whether married or not) and unmarried heterosexual couples often experience a ‘disenfranchised grief’, with ‘the death of a partner [...] complicated by the general denial by society of their right to grieve’ (Springer & Lease, 2000: 300).

**Ways of knowing about widowhood**

Although there are historical accounts of cultural practices surrounding bereavement and mourning, and analyses of images of widowhood in folklore, drama and history (Bensel-Meyers
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1985), knowledge and understanding of widowhood owe much to the work of sociologist Helena Znaniecka Lopata (1973, 1996), the most influential and prolific of scholars of widowhood worldwide. With early studies of widowhood focused on role loss and role exit, the conceptual foundations of widowhood research have shifted considerably in recent years. In her final book, written 2 years after her own widowhood, Lopata herself noted the shift from ‘the dismal image [ . . . ] of the ever-limited, ever-suffering, ever-dependent widow’ to one that is now ‘more complicated and varied’ (1996: xiv). This is largely due to research informed by more symbolic interactionist, critical gerontology, feminist and life course perspectives (van den Hoonoord, Martin-Matthews and Davidson, 2013). Instead of approaching widowhood with a ‘problematizing’ lens, the focus now is on how widowhood intersects with age, class, gender (including understandings of masculinity), ethnicity, culture, religious affiliation and environment, and on socially structured practices regarding marital status (Connidis, 2010).

A gendered lens on widowhood continues to advance understanding of women’s experiences, and remains an important focus, especially given the demography of widowhood. However, sociological and gerontological research concerning men’s ageing is both fragmented and under-theorized. Recognition of the gendered nature of widowhood foregrounds women’s experiences, while largely neglecting (both in academia and in public discourse) issues of older widowed men. The nature of masculinities, especially in later life and old age, require attention.

Transnational understandings of widowhood will increasingly become priorities as the population ages worldwide and as international migration results in diasporas of widowed people ageing in ‘foreign’ lands. Ethnicity and culture mediate and define the experience of bereavement. Little is yet known about the experience of widowhood when migration, and forces of cultural assimilation, bring contrasting understandings (home country and host country) into co-existence, thus requiring negotiation.

The lens of cultural gerontology promotes consideration of new methodologies to advance understanding of widowhood as a transition and as a status. Visual methods, literary and biographical analysis, media productions and social media all contribute to this new perspective. In socio-historical analyses, print cultures of relevant periods reflect how marriage, widowhood and death were represented culturally, legally and politically (Bradbury, 2011). Over the centuries, theatre has also been a prime vehicle for depictions of widows and widowhood. Widows are prominent in Shakespeare’s plays, with at least 31 featured among his characters (Kehler, 2006). Theatrical depictions of widowhood reflect popular culture and can be used to stimulate public discourse about societal norms and values (Feldman, Radermacher, Lorains & Haines, 2011, Feldman, Hopgood & Dickins, 2013). Theatre and film can also be used to achieve even more specific political goals, and to empower those with the devalued status of widow. Chukwu-Okoronkwo (2012) considers the potentials of film and theatre in the reorientation of Nigerian society away from dehumanizing widowhood practices, and profiles one such film, shown in Paris during celebrations of the fiftieth Anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights, and which subsequently toured Nigeria, with accompanying panel discussions. While film may serve the political purpose of exposing the treatment of widows, film that deals more generically with widowhood, or portrays the experiences of people who have been widowed, is otherwise so ubiquitous that social media contain ‘spoiler alerts’ and ‘plot warnings’ to widowed people who do not wish to be caught off-guard and unexpectedly subjected to content that prompts painful memories and associations.

Autobiographical accounts of widowhood have long circulated, and are often insightful depictions of the ‘ecstasy of love and the despair of grief’ (Martin, 2013: R13). The experiences of widows Lynn Caine (1974) and Betty Jane Wylie (1988) informed this author’s book Widowhood in Later Life (1991), providing an eloquent complement to the words of the widowed...
people featured in it. Very widely publicized accounts of widowhood by highly prominent literary figures have recently become something of a genre. Autobiographical accounts of widowhood by the American advice columnist Dr Joyce Brothers (1992), and by Joan Didion (2007), Joyce Carol Oates (2011), John Bayley (1999, with the later movie adaptation of *Elegy for Iris*) and Julian Barnes (2013), have been given prominence in mainstream media reviews, framing them in terms of broad cultural understandings of widowhood.

O’Gorman (1998) has observed that ‘public expressions of grief may be shrouded in embarrassment and deemed problematic, with continuous grieving thought to interfere with one’s daily routine’. However, a culture of personal disclosure and of memorialization has emerged since O’Gorman’s writing. While ‘continuous grieving’ may indeed be deemed problematic, public expressions of grief (especially following the death of public figures, or where death is considered ‘off time’ or tragic in some way), are now common.

The rise of social media

An emerging feature of the new cultural landscape of widowhood is the rise of social media. Research for this chapter identified at least 215 blogs about widowhood; countless websites ‘created by widowed people for widowed people’; and online videos on topics such as the legal and financial vulnerabilities of same-sex unmarried partners facing widowhood and bereavement. Websites report ‘Camp Widow’ events, and annual gatherings organized by members of the ‘Widowed Village’. Such sites and activities are framed in terms of support, acceptance, consciousness of kind (‘other people who “get it”’), empowerment and ‘fun’.

Via social media, widows reach out to others ‘who have been there’ to dialogue and discuss, and, increasingly, to meet at conferences and conventions. While older women in particular have previously had access to a reference groups of widowed age peers, the nature of those interactions appears to be different from that on some widowhood websites. As before, they meet as strangers motivated to interact by their common bond of widowhood; however, through social media, the contact can begin with much more anonymity (for example, visiting websites and/or reading blogs). It can also commence with, or graduate to, a highly public statement of one’s widowhood: creating a website, authoring a blog, filming an online video. These forms of social media involve connections well beyond one’s local community, and can then lead to online or in-person interaction. Thus, new media plays an ever prominent role in this modern culture of widowhood, sometimes leading to involvement in ‘widow’ meetings and conferences, and sustained interactions.

Conclusion

This chapter highlights advances made over several decades in focusing the lens of widowhood research specifically on older widowed persons. Nearly 20 years ago, Lopata observed that ‘many current myths concerning widows are old age myths’ (1996: 212); this will increase in the future. By late old age, most older people, and women in particular, are widowed; thus, widowhood is still an expectable event in later life. However, the duration of widowhood in later life continues to shorten. Also, increasing prevalence of divorce and singlehood in later life reduces the prevalence of widowhood. Widowhood is far less prominent as a status defining much of old age than it used to be. The meaning of widowhood as a defining characteristic of most women’s later years will continue to evolve. It remains to be seen whether widowhood will continue to have utility as a category defining access to benefits and services in old age (as is true in countries such as Canada).
Further cultural shifts may auger well for adaptation to widowhood, reducing oft-expressed sentiments of feeling left out of relationships with, and being a ‘fifth wheel’ among, ‘couple’ friends. Dramatic increases in the frequency of ‘going solo’ (Klinenberg, 2012) suggest a new world order for widowed people. In 1950, only 22 per cent of American adults were single, compared with more than 50 per cent today. People who live alone comprise 28 per cent of all US households. For newly ‘unattached’ widowed people, systematic exclusion from the predominance of coupledom may be less problematic than in decades past.

Conceptual approaches informed by life course and critical and feminist perspectives have substantially advanced understanding of widowhood in later life. Combined with in-depth qualitative analyses, studies have focused on the narrative accounts of older widowed women and challenged the dominant public narrative of misery and decline, pointing instead to a complexity of experience that is rooted in personal biography and in female and male life course experiences, rather than in later life widowhood itself. The culture of scholarship has also changed to include prospective research designs, and comparisons with those who have not experienced the loss of their spouse, or who have experienced other kinds of loss.

However, with the advent of the internet and other ‘social media’ opportunities in the first part of the twenty-first century, there is a perceptible shift once again, especially among particular communities of widowed persons. Thus, over a period of about 75 years, there has been a substantial cultural shift in public representations of widowhood. Historically, there was the public wearing of one’s widowhood, through clothing and appearance. After about the 1930s, widowhood became more invisible overall, especially in increasingly secularized and death-denying societies. More recently, the emergence of social media has enabled a declaration or even reifying of widowhood, especially among select communities of widowed persons—notably those younger and widowed ‘off-time’, or gays and lesbians who have experienced disenfranchised grief. New mechanisms for expression among widowed people and new pathways to understanding widowhood contribute substantially to recognition of the diversity and variability of experience.

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